2: Milosz S-5 (no date)1953 El Europe El

managed to survive there for two years. When the Red Army drew near, he and the other prisoners were transported to Dachau, and there they were eventually set free by the Americans. We learned of all this only after the War, when he published a volume of stories recounting his experiences.

Immediately after his release he settled in Munich. It was there in 1946 that the book, *We Were in Auschwitz*, written by him and two of his fellow-prisoners, appeared. It was dedicated to "The American Seventh Army which brought us liberation from the Dachau-Allach concentration camp." On his return to Poland, he published his volume of short stories.

I have read many books about concentration camps, but not one of them is as terrifying as his stories because he never moralizes, he relates. A special social hierarchy comes into being in a "concentration universe." At the top stand the camp authorities; after them come prisoners trusted by the administration; next come the prisoners clever enough to find means of getting sufficient food to keep up their strength. At the bottom stand the weak and clumsy, who daily tumble lower as their undernourished organisms fail to bear up under the work. In the end they die, either in the gas chamber or from an injection of phenol. Obviously this hierarchy does not include the masses of people killed immediately upon their arrival, i.e. the Jews, except for those who were single and especially fit for work. In his stories, Beta clearly defines his social position. He belonged to the caste of clever and healthy prisoners, and he *brags* about his cunning and agility. Life in a concentration camp requires constant alertness; every moment can decide one's life or death. In order to react appropriately at all times, one must know where danger lies and how to escape it: sometimes by

2: Milosz S-5 (no date)1953 El Europe El

blind obedience, sometimes by calculated negligence, sometimes by blackmail or bribery. One of his stories consists of an account of a series of dangers he dodges in the course of a single day:

1. A guard offers him some bread. To get it he has to jump a ditch that constitutes the line of watch. Guards, under orders to shoot prisoners who cross it, receive three days' leave plus five marks for everyone they kill beyond this limit. Beta, understanding the guard's intentions, refuses the bait.

2. A guard overhears him telling another prisoner the news of the fall of Kiev. Beta forestalls a report of the offense by giving the guard, through an intermediary, an old watch as a bribe.

3. He slips out of the hands of a dangerous camp overseer, or kapo, by a quick execution of an order. The fragment I quote below concerns some Greek prisoners who were too weak to march properly. As a punishment, sticks were tied to their legs. They are supervised by a Russian, Andrej.

I leap back, struck from behind by a bicycle. I whip off my cap. The Unterscharführer, a landlord from Harmenze, jumps off the bicycle red with irritation.

"What's happening in this crazy unit? Why are those people walking around with sticks tied to their legs? It's time for work!"

"They don't know how to walk!"

"If they don't know how to walk, kill them! And you, do you know another goose has disappeared?"

"Why are you standing there like a dumb dog?" the kapo screamed at me. "Tell Andrej to settle with them. Los!"

I ran down the path . . .

"Andrej, finish them off! Kapo's orders!"

Andrej seized a stick and struck with all his might. The

2: Milosz S-5 (no date)1953 El Europe El

Greek shielded himself with his arm, howled, and fell. Andrej put the stick across his throat, stepped on it and rocked himself. I went on my way quickly.

His day is filled not only with escapes from danger, but also with the intricate game waged between him and his Russian co-prisoner Ivan. Ivan has stolen a piece of soap from him. He decides to avenge himself and patiently seeks his opportunity. He observes that Ivan has stolen a goose; an artfully arranged report (so that he won't be stigmatized as an informer) occasions a search. The goose is found and Ivan is beaten by an SS man. The score is settled.

He is proud to succeed when others, less clever, perish. There is no small amount of plain sadism in his repeated emphasis of the fact that he is well-dressed, well-fed, and healthy.

"They keep moving to avoid a beating; they eat grass and slimy mud so they won't feel hungry; they walk dejectedly, still-living corpses," he says of his fellow-inmates. But of himself: "It's good to work after one has eaten a breakfast of a rasher of bacon with bread and garlic, and washed it down with a can of condensed milk." A detail concerning his clothes (all about him are half-naked wretches): "I go into the shade and place my jacket under me *so that I won't soil my silk shirt* [the italics are mine, C. M.] and settle down comfortably to sleep. Each of us rests however he can afford to." And here is a scene of "class" contrast. Beker, another prisoner, is to be burned in the crematorium because he is too weak to be useful.

At that moment, a huge gray skull emerged out of the depths, over the edge of the wooden bunk and embarrassed, blinking eyes peered at us. Then Beker's face appeared, crumpled and more aged than ever.

2: Milosz S-5 (no date)1953 El Europe El

159* "Teddy, I have something to ask you."
• 539 "Talk," I said, leaning down to him.

"Teddy, I'm going to the chimney."

I leaned down a little more, and looked into his eyes at close range. They were calm and empty.

"Teddy, I've been hungry for so long. Give me something to eat. For this last evening."

Kazik slapped me on the knee.

"Do you know this Jew?"

"It's Beker," I answered softly.

"You, Jew, get up there on the bunk and stuff yourself. When you're full, you can take the rest with you to the chimney. Go on! I don't sleep there so you can take along your lice."

"Teddy," he took me by the arm, "come. In the barrack I've got a wonderful apple pie, straight from my mother."

The strong and clever were used by the camp authorities for special work, which gave them the opportunity to procure food and clothing. One of the most sought-after jobs was that of unloading the box-cars that brought Jews from all the cities of Europe to Auschwitz. These Jews brought suitcases full of clothes, gold, jewels, and food with them because they had been told they were leaving for "re-settlement." When the train entered the gates of the camp, the frightened crowd was immediately chased out of the cars. Those who were young and strong enough to work were separated out, while old people and women with children were sent at once to the gas chambers and crematoriums. The work of the prisoners was to carry out the baggage that was destined to enrich the Reich and the camp administration. Beta describes his work around the transport. He has gotten into this brigade through a French friend, Henri.

In the abundant literature of atrocity of the twentieth century, one rarely finds an account written from the

2: Milosz S-5 (no date)1953 El Europe El

point of view of an accessory to the crime. Authors are usually ashamed of this role. But collaboration is an empty word as applied to a concentration camp. The machine is impersonal; responsibility shifts from those who carry out orders to those higher, always higher. Beta's stories about the "transport" should, I believe, be included in all anthologies of literature dealing with the lot of man in totalitarian society, if ever such anthologies are compiled.

The arrival of a "transport" is spread out, like a play, over several acts. A few quotations will give a better picture of his literary method than any amount of description:

PROLOGUE, *or anticipation of the "transport"*

Greeks are sitting around us, moving their jaws voraciously like huge inhuman insects, greedily eating moldy clods of bread. They are uneasy; they don't know what they'll be doing. Rails and planks worry them. They don't like heavy hauling.

"Was wir arbeiten?" they ask.

"Niks. Transport kommen, alles Krematorium, compris?"

"Alles verstehen," they answer in crematorium esperanto. They calm down; they won't be loading rails on trucks, or carrying planks.

ACT I, *or the arrival of the "transport"*

A striped crowd lay near the tracks in the long strips of shade. It breathed heavily and unevenly, spoke lazily in its own tongues and gazed indifferently at the majestic people in green uniform, at the green of the trees, near and unattainable, at the steeple of a distant little church which at that moment was tolling a late angelus.

"The transport is coming," someone said, and everyone stood up in expectation. Freight cars appeared around the curve as the train backed in. The trainman standing in the caboose

2: Milosz S-5 (no date)1953 El Europe El

159x
539

leaned out, waved his hand, whistled. The locomotive screeched, wheezed and the train trundled slowly along the station. Behind the tiny barred windows one could see human faces, pale, crumpled, disheveled, as if they were sleepy—frightened women, and men who, exotically, had hair. They passed slowly, gazing at the station in silence. Then something started to boil inside the wagons and to beat against their wooden walls.

"Water! Air!" Despairing, hollow cries burst out.

Human faces pressed to the windows, lips desperately gasping for air sucked in a few gulps, vanished; others struggled into their place, then they too vanished The shrieks and moans grew steadily louder.

Act II, *or the segregation* (a few scenes will suffice)

Here comes a woman walking briskly, hurrying almost imperceptibly yet feverishly. A small child with the plump, rosy face of a cherub runs after her, fails to catch up, stretches out its hands, crying, "Mama, mama!"

"Woman, take this child in your arms!"

"Sir, it isn't my child, it isn't mine!" the woman shouts hysterically, and runs away covering her face with her hands. She wants to hide; she wants to reach those who won't leave in a truck, who will leave on foot, who will live. She is young, healthy, pretty, she wants to live.

But the child runs after her, pleading at the top of its voice, "Mama, mama, don't run away!"

"It's not mine, not mine, not . . . !"

Until Andrej, the sailor from Sevastopol, overtook her. His eyes were troubled by vodka and the heat. He reached her, knocked her off her feet with a single powerful blow and, as she fell, caught her by the hair and dragged her up again. His face was distorted with fury.

"Why you lousy fucking Jew-bitch! Jebit twoju mat'! You'd run away from your own child! I'll show you, you whore!" He grabbed her in the middle, one paw throttling her throat which

2: Milosz S-5 (no date)1953 El Europe El

wanted to shout, and flung her into the truck like a heavy sack of grain.

"Here! Take this with you, you slut!" And he threw her child at her feet.

"Gut gemacht. That's how one should punish unnatural mothers," said an SS man standing near the van.

A pair of people fall to the ground entangled in a desperate embrace. He digs his fingers into her flesh convulsively, tears at her clothes with his teeth. She screams hysterically, curses, blasphemes until, stifled by a boot, she chokes and falls silent. They split them apart like a tree; and herd them into the car like animals.

Others are carrying a young girl with a missing leg; they hold her by her arms and by her one remaining leg. Tears are streaking down her face as she whispers sadly, "Please, please, it hurts, it hurts . . ." They heave her into a truck, among the corpses. She will be burned alive, together with them.

Act III, *or the conversation of the witnesses*

A cool and starry evening falls. We are lying on the tracks. It is infinitely silent. Anemic lamps burn on high poles behind the circles of light.

"Did you exchange shoes?" Henri asks me.

"No."

"Why not?"

"Man, I have enough, absolutely enough!"

"Already? After the first transport? Just think, me—since Christmas maybe a million people have passed through my hands. The worst are the transports from Paris: a man always meets friends."

"And what do you say to them?"

"That they're going to take a bath, and that we'll meet later in the camp. What would you say?"

2: Milosz S-5 (no date)1953 El Europe El

169* EPILOGUE (many trains came to Auschwitz that evening.
● 539 The transport totaled 15,000 people)

As we return to the camp, the stars begin to fade, the sky becomes ever more translucent and lifts above us, the night grows light. A clear, hot day announces itself.

From the crematoriums, broad columns of smoke rise steadily and merge above into a gigantic, black river that turns exceedingly slowly in the sky over Birkenau and disappears beyond the forests, in the direction of Trzebinia. The transport is already burning.

We pass an SS squad, moving with mechanized weapons to relieve the guard. They march evenly, shoulder to shoulder, one mass, one will.

"Und Morgen die ganze Welt . . ." they sing at the top of their lungs.

Beta is a nihilist in his stories, but by that I do not mean that he is amoral. On the contrary, his nihilism results from an ethical passion, from disappointed *love* of the world and of humanity. He wants to go the limit in describing what he saw; he wants to depict with complete accuracy a world in which there is no longer any place for indignation. The human species is *naked* in his stories, stripped of those tendencies toward good which last only so long as the habit of civilization lasts. But the habit of civilization is fragile; a sudden change in circumstances, and humanity reverts to its primeval savagery. How deluded are those respectable citizens who, striding along the streets of English or American cities, consider themselves men of virtue and goodness! Of course, it is easy to condemn a woman who would abandon her child in order to save her own life. This is a monstrous act. Yet a woman who, while reading on her comfortable sofa, judges her unfortunate sister should pause to consider whether fear